

Nixon Follow-up Case Study

[Full scale site visits were conducted at Nixon during the spring of 2004 and 2005. The 2006 follow-up was a phone interview conducted with the principal of Nixon Elementary, Kay Coe.]

In the spring of 2004, we first visited Nixon Elementary School to study their implementation of the Iowa Professional Development Model (IPDM). Following that first visit, we noted that the school had made excellent progress in its first effort to implement the IPDM. The staff has addressed the operating principles – focusing on curriculum and instruction, sharing decision making and using student data to make decisions about professional development. We also observed that the school had additional work to do in the areas of structuring collaborative teams for greater productivity and studying their implementation of PD content.

Content and Training Design

We again visited the school in the spring of 2005. Nixon staff had continued their focus on fluency strategies, with the goal of improving reading comprehension, and had added the comprehension strategies recommended by Stephanie Harvey (*Strategies That Work*). The school still had very little time allocated (by the district) for professional development, and teachers were attempting to teach themselves and each other this new set of instructional strategies. Teachers were gamely trying to stay on top of everything but many admitted to feeling a bit overwhelmed.

We brainstormed with the principal ways of getting more in-depth training for teachers as well as general modifications in their training design. At the end of the 2004-2005 academic year, the staff shifted their PD focus to the comprehension strategies they were trying to learn and implement and made fluency strategies (choral reading, echo reading, reader's theater, etc.) their secondary focus. This decision was an excellent example of a school's using their student data to direct their PD efforts.

During the summer of 2005, the principal and groups of teachers developed "comprehension tool kits" for each grade level, developing plans and materials appropriate for the use of Harvey's comprehension strategies (questioning, visualizing, inferring, synthesizing, etc.) During the current school year, 40 minutes each Wednesday morning are devoted to the study of the comprehension strategies. Each week teachers sign up to present a lesson/strategy that worked well, in a gallery walk format, the presenters rotate to share the strategies. The strategies come from the tool kit or other resources they are collecting. The training design is still light on demonstrations but the PD design is definitely an improvement in terms of providing greater learner opportunities for all staff.

The kits have also provided structure for the grade-level collaborative teams and fostered the on-going effort to integrate special education teachers into those teams.

Teacher Collaboration

During our first visit and again at our second visit, teachers had chosen to form cross-grade level collaborative teams. While teachers in the various school committees worked together smoothly and efficiently to accomplish specific tasks, the collaborative teams were not functioning very well to support Nixon's PD initiative. In the spring of 2005, Nixon decided to use their existing

grade level teams, plus special education teachers, for collaborative planning and the study of student data and implementation efforts.

Study of Implementation

The study of implementation continues to be an evolving process at Nixon. During the first year, teachers kept journals of their use of fluency strategies, although the data contained in the journals were never combined and shared with staff in terms of their collective progress. During the second year of the PD initiative, teachers tallied their weekly use of fluency lessons and the fluency probes they were using, thus providing the leadership team with frequency data but no fidelity data. That process has continued through the third year of their initiative.

The principal is aware of the need for fidelity data and is considering ways to improve the schools information base on how well specific comprehension strategies are being used with students. As the school solves this particular issue, the leadership team can better target the content for specific professional development sessions.

Formative Data

A district-designed test – LAPO-ERA – is administered three times a year and measures the accuracy and fluency of oral reading as well as comprehension of the passages used. Benchmarks are established for all three variables at each grade level and students who attain those benchmarks are deemed “proficient”.

On a monthly basis, students are administered the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) which provides data on student ability to comprehend explicit versus implicit text messages. These data provide continuous input for PD sessions and the choice of comprehension strategies to utilize in greater depth. They also provide guidance for teacher collaborative planning.

Summative Data

Despite the difficulty of pursuing an ambitious PD agenda with inadequate training time and without external expert assistance, the hard work of the Nixon staff is paying off in student learning. The table below provides longitudinal data for fourth grade, including subgroups, for the three years Nixon has implemented the Iowa Professional Development Model.

Percent Proficient: Nixon 4th Grade ITBS Longitudinal Data

4 th Grade	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Reading: All Students	80	75	83
Reading: Low SES Students	67	33*	88
Reading: Students w/IEPs	25	54.5	68

* Change in legal requirements for reporting data.

Nixon has done a stunning job of closing the achievement gap at their building. There is virtually no difference at this point between the reading achievement of students on free and reduced lunch and those who do not receive such assistance. The growth of students with IEPs, however, is especially noteworthy. At the beginning of this initiative, Level II IEP students were not fully included in the instructional program at Nixon. In this, the third year of IPDM, these students are fully included. Special Education teachers work alongside regular education teachers in classrooms, in PD activities, and in collaborative teams for lesson planning. Small groups of students, including regular education and special education students, are taught specific skills within the regular classroom setting. The inclusion is so complete that it is impossible at this point, without prior knowledge, to enter one of these classrooms and identify students with IEPs. Since Nixon serves as a Special Education center within the district, it has a high percentage of students with IEPs (11%), which makes the current achievement all the more notable.

Other Comments

According to the principal, the difficulty of the IPDM at Nixon continues to be time for teachers and the principal do deal with tasks authentically. They struggle with the study of implementation because the principal does not have enough time in classrooms to look at the fidelity of strategies and the leadership team does not have enough time for the deep discussions about strengthening their implementation. Staff turnover disrupts the functioning of collaborative teams and time is needed to train new staff members not only in the comprehension and fluency content of the PD program but also in the process of working with peers to implement that content with students.

Despite the difficulties reported by Nixon staff in using the IPDM as well as they would like to, they have done an impressive job of implementing the Iowa Professional Development Model by combining strategic use of the time available with an admirable work ethic, and their student data reflect those efforts.

When discussing their work, Nixon staff tend to be self-critical (“we could do a better job on this, we need to do better on that”). Their behavior is reminiscent of world-class athletes who train daily for small increments of improvement and are never satisfied with their current performance. Given the obvious efficacy of Nixon’s efforts, however, we recommend a time-out for celebration!